

From Diagnosis to Prognosis: What Instructors Know about Their Students' Writing Apprehension

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Abstract

Different students enter institutions of higher learning with varying degrees of writing apprehension. The apprehension ranges from anxiety from writing tasks to avoiding courses that involve a lot of writing. For many universities, the writing centers or academic writing courses are meant to equip students to be able to deal with the high writing demands in the academic environment. But how well do instructors know their students' writing apprehension and what does this knowledge mean to instructors? The present study seeks to examine the significance of instructor's knowledge of students' writing apprehension in the teaching and learning exchange. Again, the study investigates the strategies lecturers adopt in minimizing students' writing apprehension. Using the survey design, this study purposively samples 20 academic writing instructors from both public and private universities in Ghana for an exploration into their awareness of and how they eliminate or reduce students' writing apprehension and how it affects their instruction. Data were collected through a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questionnaire administered to participants to evaluate their Writing Apprehension Awareness or Knowledge (WAAK), Writing Apprehension Detection Strategies (WADS), and Writing Apprehension Reduction Strategies (WARS). Using a three-point scale, these categories were evaluated as limited, moderate or adequate. Results of the study showed that respondents generally rated *limited* in all three categories, demonstrating the lack of attention given to writing apprehension. The study revealed large class sizes, instructors' work overload, and the organization of writing courses as some of the immediate causes of writing apprehension. Findings of this study have implications for course design, writing pedagogy and structural consideration for institutions of higher education.

Keywords: writing apprehension, Writing Apprehension Awareness, Writing Apprehension Detection Strategies, and Writing Apprehension Reduction Strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a prerequisite skill for literacy and any higher academic achievement. Nearly every academic endeavor involves some form of writing ranging from putting up a few sentences to composing pages of coherent and rigorous texts. The mention of writing evokes intriguing ambivalence among students, educators and even professionals. On one hand are those who have nurtured an affirmative enchantment towards writing; on the other hand, there are those, seemingly the majority, who have varying degrees of aversion towards writing. However, it seems of all the four language skills, writing is the most feared both as an academic skill and as a professional requirement. Researchers and educators alike admit that writing in itself is complex (Bruning & Horn, 2000) and doing it in a first, second or foreign language poses a greater challenge to many, learners as well as teachers (Bayat, 2014). As a productive skill, writing gives expression to our thoughts, feelings, and experiences, whether spontaneous or accumulated. But significantly writing serves as a tool for learning about our experiences, feelings, thoughts, values, and environment.

Unfortunately, this instrumental dimension of the writing experience is hardly explored (Reeves, 1997) both in and out of the classroom. Traditionally, the writing lesson is marked by series of formal compositions many of which are detached from learners' everyday language realities and needs, and the obvious negative feedback from the writing instructor account for the unacceptable levels of apprehension and anxiety learners have towards writing.

Writing in a second or foreign language even presents a more complex challenge to the learner (Erkan & Saban, 2011). However, Choi (2013) defines this complexity from the wider intrigue and anxiety associated with second and foreign language learning. Second and foreign language anxiety in earlier studies have been conceptualized as a "complex" (Bayat, 2014; Erka and Saban, 2011) comprising perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that characterize the language learning experience. This complex is proven to have significant adverse consequences on self-efficacy and language learning in general. Some studies (e.g. Erka and Saban, 2011) attempt to distinguish between language learning anxiety and language-skill specific anxiety such as writing anxiety and reject any significant correlation between the two.

The present study accepts the view that in an ESL context like Ghana, language learning anxiety is prevalent as a result of "perfectionist feelings" (Yaman, 2014:1118) and could have significant influence on writing apprehension. However, this study strongly considers writing apprehension as language-skill specific,

suggesting the need to look at writing and its anxiety independent of language learning anxiety.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since Daly and Miller's pioneering research on writing apprehension in the 70's resulting in the development of Writing Apprehension Tests (WAT) used to assess learners' writing apprehension, a lot of research attention has gone into writing apprehension from the perspective of the learner. However, little attention has gone into evaluating instructors' appreciation and consideration of writing apprehension as a significant predictor of learners' success in writing. Thus the present study draws attention to instructors' understanding or awareness of writing apprehension and how they apply this awareness in detecting and alleviating writing apprehension among their students.

Again, instructors get frustrated at their students' low writing achievements and attitude in spite of intense instruction. Such low achievements manifest in students' sketchy compositions, syntactically superficial sentences, low scores in homework and exams etc. (Yaman, 2014). While bemoaning this state of affair, instructors mostly blame students for their inordinate negative attitude towards writing resulting in their low writing achievements but hardly reflect on their own instructional practices and institutional challenges that significantly contribute to low performance. The present study situates writing apprehension within the learner-instructor environment with the emphasis on the instructors' awareness and practices in dealing with writing apprehension.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Generally studies on writing apprehension have followed two trajectories: the first focuses on writing apprehension from the perspective of learners. Such studies usually adopt various instruments in measuring levels of writing apprehension among learners. The second trajectory, which has attracted very little attention, focuses on instructors' awareness of writing apprehension (WA) and strategies in dealing with apprehension among learners. The present study takes the latter trajectory, thus shifting the focus from the learner to the instructor as a significant mediator whose understanding of the impact of WA and invariably teaching approach could alleviate WA and deliver the writing success learners aspire to achieve. Specifically this study attempts

- To investigate instructors' awareness of learners' WA
- To find out how instructors detect learners' WA
- To identify strategies instructors use to minimize learners' WA

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual framework

Writing apprehension has been conceptualized differently depending on the theoretical framework (for instance, cognitive or affective) one adopts. In the present study writing apprehension and anxiety are interchangeably used to describe tendencies where writers or learners avoid writing tasks regardless of their writing proficiency. Daly and Miller first used the term writing apprehension (Sadeghi, 2014) in the 70's to describe "dispositional attitudes" that are situational, context-based and evolves with time. This perspective to writing apprehension divorces WA from the generic language learning anxiety and dismisses any correlation between the two. It is instructive that learners could have high writing apprehension regardless of their high proficiency in all or any of the other three language skills. In this regard, writing apprehension is associated with any reluctance or resistance towards a given writing task even when the writer is expected to have the required skill. This apprehension may manifest itself emotionally in the form of fear, sadness, and anger and in some cases physically in the form of cramps and tummy upset (Bayat, 2014). But apprehension in a general sense is not entirely negative (Yaman, 2014). A tolerable level of apprehension can serve as motivation in the process of writing. In this sense the writer is compelled to give off his or her best. However, high levels of apprehension which results in avoidance of writing tasks and writing related professions or courses are a cause of concern to educators and researchers because it impedes writing among many learners (Salovey & Haar, 1990). Behaviours, attitudes, and written products (text) permeate most literature on manifestations of writing apprehension (Reeves, 1997). Again, peer and instructor evaluations or criticisms are major causes of learners' writing apprehension (Jezaeia and Jafarib, 2014).

Empirical Studies

Following Daly and Miller's pioneering work on identifying learners' writing apprehension, a lot of researchers have developed interest in writing apprehension among native and non-native English writers and students.

Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011) attempted to establish the relationship between writing in English and writing apprehension among Jordanian postgraduate students studying in Malaysia. They considered the effect of age, socio-economic status and the situations in which the learners were tasked to write. Findings of the study supported not only high levels of writing apprehension among Jordanian postgraduate students but also significant effects of age, socioeconomic status, and learning situation on writing apprehension among the

students. The study also revealed that the students were more apprehensive towards their theses than other assignments.

In another related study, Rezaeia and Jafarib (2014) investigated the levels, types and causes of writing anxiety among Iranian EFL students. They used the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) (Cheng, 2004), and the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) in a triangulated observation and semi-structured interview. The results of this mixed method design study supported a high level of writing anxiety among participants. Again, the commonest type of apprehension was cognitive anxiety, which stems from low self-confidence, fear of instructors criticism, low level of language proficiency. The study once again brought to bear the overwhelming role of the instructor and the educational system in dealing with learners' writing apprehension.

Kim (2006) similarly examined the relationship between writing apprehension and English writing achievement. A total of 136 college students took the Writing Apprehension Test and final course writing tests. Learners' scores were subjected to descriptive statistics, factor analysis, reliability coefficients, correlations, MANOVA, and t-test to address research questions. The results of the study showed Korean college students were highly apprehensive in writing English and had negative perception about their writing ability. Fear of evaluation, and avoidance of writing in English were the most significant manifestations of their writing apprehension.

Finally, Reeves (1997) observes how inadvertently her elementary teacher sowed the seed of writing apprehension in her. The writer advocates instructors' diligent and creative teaching, close monitoring of learners' attitude, varying teaching strategies and instructors' own participation in writing. Reeves' (1997) observation redirects research attention to the less trodden path of the instructor as a key player in learners' writing apprehension. Therefore, the present study takes a look at the question of the level of awareness instructors have on writing apprehension, and how they detect and deal with writing apprehension.

5. METHODOLOGY

Participants & instrument

Participants of the present study were university instructors of Academic Writing, Communication Skills, or Language and Study Skills. Participants were selected purposively from both public and private universities in Ghana. In all 20 participants (8 males and 12 females) took part in this study. All participants had minimum two years' experience as instructors and taught writing either as a course on its own or as integrated language course. Participants fell within the age range of 29 and 49 years, with a mean age of 35 years.

A 22-item questionnaire was administered to all participants. Apart from the demographic information requested, the rest of the questionnaire elicited three sets of data. The first set was intended to evaluate instructors' knowledge or awareness of the concept of writing apprehension. Data here were coded as instructors' Writing Apprehension Awareness or Knowledge (WAAK). Each response was evaluated as limited/minimal, moderate, or adequate. The second set of data ascertained whether respondents took steps to identify their learners' writing apprehension in the course of instructions. Data collected here were designated as Writing Apprehension Detection Strategies (WADS) and examined as limited/minimal, moderate or adequate. The last set of data identified strategies instructors deploy in eliminating or reducing writing apprehension, thus Writing Apprehension Reduction Strategies (WARS). These strategies were also evaluated as limited, moderate or adequate. In the analysis, data collected were coded into the above three categories. Our research team used a three point scale (1-3) to determine in each category whether responses reflected limited, moderate or adequate representations of the themes.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1 below shows the results of the analysis of data elicited through the questionnaire after they were coded and rated by the research team.

Table 1: Results on writing apprehension awareness, detection, and reduction strategies

	Writing Awareness (WAAK)	Apprehension & Knowledge (WAAK)	Writing Detection (WADS)	Apprehension Strategies (WADS)	Writing Reduction (WARS)	Apprehension Strategies (WARS)
Limited	8		16		11	
Moderate	10		2		4	
Adequate	2		2		5	

The results show that 8 respondents out of the 20, had limited knowledge on writing apprehension, 16 took little or limited steps to detect apprehension among their learners, and 11 did very little about reducing or eliminating writing apprehension among their learners. These respondents under each of the three categories rated 1 out of 3 and seemed apprehensive towards the questionnaire in spite of assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Their responses were largely scanty, and in some cases respondents were frank about their lack of

knowledge or application of writing apprehension strategies.

In the analysis, responses considered moderate rated 2 out of 3. In all, 10 respondents had moderate awareness of writing apprehension. 2 claimed some moderated steps in detecting apprehension and 4 in a moderate way took steps to reduce learners' apprehension.

Respondents who fell into the adequate score were those who rated 3 out of three points. 2 out of the 20 respondents demonstrated their knowledge and awareness of writing apprehension by their detailed explanation and exemplification of causes of writing apprehension. 2 respondents showed how they took steps to detect apprehension and 5 seemed confident that their teaching strategies reduced writing apprehension.

7. FINDINGS

(a) Writing Apprehension Awareness and Knowledge among Instructors

The majority of participants had moderate knowledge of writing apprehension but 40% of respondents had limited understanding of the phenomenon. Among these were those who rejected any significant impact of writing apprehension on students writing. The remaining 20% who seemed adequately informed about writing apprehension identified the following as manifestations of writing apprehension among learners:

- *Learners give scanty responses to questions that require details*
- *Some learners avoid courses that demand lots of writing*
- *Students lack confidence about their own writing*
- *Students have poor command of the written English*
- *Students dislike writing for fear of criticism*
- *Students give excuses when tasked to write*

Reasons given for the causes of such apprehension include:

- *Poor teaching approaches by teachers/instructors*
- *Stereotyping of students*
- *Learners' poor attitudes towards writing*

The above responses link writing apprehension to both the instructor and the learner. Although the learner may enter the writing class with his/her own negative attitudes about writing, the instructor's anticipation, diagnosis, and mitigation of such apprehension is fundamental in any successful writing programme. Reeves (1997) strongly links the teachers' pronouncements and disposition to writing apprehension while Leki (1999) suggests that the above manifestations and cause can be dealt with through appropriate classroom practices.

(b) Writing Apprehension Detection Strategies used by Instructors

The majority of participants did not deliberately deploy strategies that detect learners' writing apprehension. They cited the following as reason why they were unable to take steps to detect writing apprehension:

- *Large class sizes, heavy workload, insufficient support and capacity building, writing competing with the other language skills*

Those in the moderate category explained that they sometimes held discussions with their students about their writing apprehension but admitted that it was sparingly done as a result of the above reasons. The remaining 20% categorized as adequate claimed they administered Writing Apprehension Tests (WAT) on a sample of their students, held discussions regularly with learners about their writing apprehension and analyzed learners' writing for possible clues about their apprehension.

(c) Writing Apprehension Reduction Strategies (WARS) deployed by instructors

Concerning the application of knowledge on writing apprehension, the majority admitted they did not deploy any strategies aimed at reducing apprehension among their learners. The reasons given were mainly large class sizes, heavy workload for instructors, poor attitudes and inadequate professional development activities. 40% of the respondents advised their learners who are deemed to be apprehensive. 30% were clear that the writing conferences, peer coaching, process-oriented writing tasks, freewriting, and positive feedback they adopted in class were effective strategies in dealing with learners' writing apprehension.

8. DISCUSSION

In all, findings of this study bring into focus the critical role of the instructor in dealing with writing apprehension. First, the instructor's knowledge or awareness of writing apprehension and how it adversely affect their learners' writing would have a huge influence on the approaches and strategies he/she deploys in his/her teaching. Instructors with adequate understanding of writing apprehension are sensitive to their learners' cognitive and emotional response to writing (Reeves, 1997). On the other hand, instructors with minimal or limited awareness of their learners writing apprehension may inadvertently transfer their own apprehension or sow seeds of writing apprehension in learners (Reeves, 1997). Instructors' conducts such as bullying learners with lots of writing tests, openly criticizing and ridiculing learners' writing, and not giving feedback to learners create conditions for writing apprehension to thrive.

Again, the results of the present study reveal large class sizes, instructors' workloads, and lack of

continuous professional development as some reasons why instructors could not take steps to detect and deal with their learners' writing apprehension. With the growing students' enrollment in both public and private institutions of higher learning in Ghana, classes are growing in size resulting in more workload for instructors in institutions where lecturer population is dwindling. The obvious consequence is the lack of proper attention to learners' writing challenges, including writing apprehension. Generally, detecting and dealing with learners' writing apprehension requires the process approach to students' writing. This is a recursive process requiring more time, effort, and motivation in designing, monitoring and evaluating both the process and students' work and offering relevant feedback and support to the learner. Clearly, large class sizes, overloads, and inadequate professional support would be a huge disincentive even in cases where the instructor is aware of students' writing apprehension and would love to deal with it.

9. IMPLICATION

The findings of the present study have implication for the teaching of writing in institutions of higher learning in Ghana. First, this study reignites the debate on teaching writing in its own right (that is, as a course) or teaching it in an integrated language framework. While the former would be conducive for deploying effective apprehension detection and reduction strategies, the latter offers limited time and space for writing as it competes with the other language skills. Even though writing is the most preferred medium of evaluating learners output in school, it's unclear why in many institutions of higher learning, it could not be taught as a course on its own.

Again, our findings have implications for instructors and university authorities. A lot of literature on the teaching of writing supports the overwhelming impact of writing apprehension on students' writing. If our universities are serious about their writing courses, then both authorities and instructors ought to consider both structural and pedagogical factors that address learners' writing challenges, including writing apprehension. The growing students' population ought to have a commensurate lecturer population to ensure manageable classes where students could receive the needed attention to their writing challenges. Instructors' motivation and professional development should be both a personal responsibility and institutional concern.

10. CONCLUSION

The value of writing as course seems to be underestimated; it is therefore not surprising that issues of writing such as apprehension have not been given the needed premium in institutions of higher education in Ghana as shown in this study. While this study did not attempt to prove statistically instructors' lack of or limited awareness of writing apprehension, it has brought into focus, in quite a detailed description, reasons why writing apprehension has not been given the needed attention in Ghanaian universities. This study derives its strength from offering Ghanaian and instructors' perspectives to writing apprehension. This is a significant departure from studies on writing apprehension, which have mainly focused on the learner. This study has shown that participants, mainly instructors of writing and language courses, exhibited limited awareness of writing apprehension and the consequent lack of detection and remedial measures. This study tacitly brings the entire challenge of writing apprehension to the court of the instructor and their institutions on the premise that if these parties accept the reality of writing apprehension and confront it decisively and collaboratively, the rippling effect on the learner would be evident in the learners' writing. Clearly, this is an invitation to instructors to reflect on their own professional competence and motivation and also to research on writing apprehension, its effects, and remedies in a Ghanaian ESL context. Such research is needed in both educational and professional contexts.

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